

HIV Infection Rate Rises for U.S. Blacks

BOSTON -- The HIV infection rate has doubled among blacks in the U.S. over a decade while holding steady among whites -- stark evidence of a widening racial gap in the epidemic, government scientists said Friday.

Other troubling statistics indicate that almost half of all infected people in the U.S. who should be receiving HIV drugs are not getting them. The findings were released in Boston at the 12th Annual Retrovirus Conference, the world's chief scientific gathering on the disease.

"It's incredibly disappointing," said Terje Anderson, director of the National Association of People With AIDS. "We just have a burgeoning epidemic in the African American community that is not being dealt with effectively."

Researchers and AIDS prevention advocates attributed the high rate among blacks to such factors as drug addiction, poverty and poor access to health care.

The HIV rates were derived from the widely used National Health and Nutrition Examinations Surveys, which analyze a representative sample of U.S. households and contain the most complete HIV data in the country. Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compared 1988-1994 data with figures from 1999-2002.

The surveys look only at young and middle-aged adults who live in households, excluding such groups as soldiers, prisoners and homeless. Thus, health officials believe the numbers probably underestimate true HIV rates in this country.

Still, they show a striking rise in the prevalence of the AIDS virus from 1% to 2% of blacks. White rates held steady at 0.2%. Largely because of the increase among blacks, the overall U.S. rate rose slightly to 0.4% from 0.3%.

Smaller studies had shown rising infection rates among blacks in recent years, but this study takes a longer and more complete look at changes in the general population.

"I think it's very concerning," said Dr. Susan Buchbinder, who leads HIV research for the city of San Francisco. "I think what we need to look at is how we can reduce those rates and get more people into treatment." She recommended a stronger focus on treating drug addiction.

The lead CDC researcher, Geraldine McQuillan, said she was encouraged to see the HIV rate among younger blacks holding steady at just under 1.5%. "It tells me we're making some headway," she said.

Other national data and published reports studied by the CDC showed that 480,000 HIV-infected people ages 15 to 49 should have been getting antiviral drugs in 2003, yet only 268,000, or 56%, were given such medication.

Researcher Eyasu Teshale of the CDC said the gap represents "a substantial unmet health-care need."

Treatment is widely viewed as a central component in prevention. Powerful AIDS drugs that came into wide use in the mid-1990s can knock down levels of the virus in the body, reducing the chances that the patient will infect others.

Nearly a million people in the U.S. have contracted the AIDS virus since the outbreak began in the early 1980s. About 40,000 people test positive each year, and more than 18,000 die. However, U.S. infections have remained fairly level in recent years with the use of powerful HIV drugs.